

“Strange”

Isaiah 11:1-9/Matthew 1:18-25

FPC/December 4, 2011/2nd Sunday of Advent: Love

By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

Sometimes the ideas and images of the Bible pop up in our lives in strange ways.

Amidst the growing greenhouse that we call “home,” Jeanne and I got a cinnamon tree a few years ago. It was your typical looking house tree; about three feet tall in a large pot. We brought it home, set it by a sunny window, and watered it.

However, in about a week leaves began to drop from the tree. We weren’t concerned. We thought it was just a little shocked....just a little adjustment to its new home. But as the days and weeks rolled by, more and more leaves fell. Limbs began to dry up and die. We swept up the leaves and trimmed back the limbs. We were concerned.

The decline continued. We became disappointed and sad as we watched. The tree became bare. The limbs left were few, and they were dried up and dead. I cut off the dead tree to more easily dispose of it. Only a small 10 inch high trunk stood out of the dirt in the pot. It was a sad contrast to what we had hoped.

But then I noticed two things:

One, in picking up the pot to cut the tree off I noticed there were no holes in the bottom of the pot. The water couldn’t drain, and the roots couldn’t breathe. Curious, I took the pot with the ten inch stump outside and punched a couple holes in the bottom of the pot. Water gushed out. Now we knew what the problem had been.

And second, I noticed there was still a little green on the thin, ten inch stump....all that was left of the cinnamon tree.

And then I got this crazy idea...a small seed of a hope really. I told Jeanne, “Let’s hang on to this stump of a tree for a little while, and see what happens.”

So we did....a ten inch stump in a large pot (now with drainage holes), set again by a sunny window, and we watered it. It was a funny thing to see....but we watched it.

And then a strange thing started to happen. The ten inch stump put out a new limb...one, small limb. The limb grew horizontally out of the stump for a while.....and then it went vertical. This limb started growing up where the trunk of the tree had been. And then this limb “who thinks it’s trunk” started to put out other limbs. A strange thing was happening; out of death there was new life.....out of a bare pot with a ten inch stump there was the green of limb and leaf. It was amazing....and a little strange.

And it’s still amazing. This cinnamon tree continues to grow. It’s a little odd looking, but it’s healthy. I brought it to church this morning. Check it out. The crazy new tree grows out of the old stump.

And I suppose we could have given the tree a more biblical name....like “the shoot”, or “the stump of Jesse,” or “branch,” or even “Isaiah.” We could have done that. But we didn’t. We just call our tree “stumpy.” And amidst our greenhouse of a home with a coffee tree, a dwarf banana tree, a Christmas cactus.....we also have “stumpy”.....a strange cinnamon tree that is a sign of hope. It’s not what we had planned.....but in a strange way it has become more than we expected.

II. Brief Exegesis

I think of our text from Isaiah when I see “stumpy,” and I think of “stumpy” when I read the text from Isaiah.....”A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (Isaiah 11:1). I don’t think Isaiah had “stumpy” in mind when he wrote this text.....but it works for me. It’s Isaiah’s prophecy that the Messiah would come out of the cut off lineage of King David. Somehow, in the strange ways of God, God’s Savior would spring up out of David’s descendents.....hundreds of years gone and forgotten. I guess Isaiah saw a little green on the stump of David’s kingdom from long ago.

And this “shoot,” this “branch,” this Savior will be empowered with the Spirit of God, and have the best qualities of all the kings. He will bring the kingdom of God, a reign of peace, when the disorder and chaos of creation is transformed into one of peace and justice. And this Savior....this branch.....will be for all nations. A shoot from a stump.....a branch from some roots....the Savior coming in a way not expected. God’s ways are often strange.

And God has a history of strange ways with us. God’s plans of salvation for the vast creation are first carried forward by a couple, Abraham and Sarah. They are both over 90 and childless, and yet God promises descendents to them. I’m sure they thought the plan of God was strange. And Moses, the great liberator and lawgiver of Israel, got his start as the son of Jewish slaves in Egypt, placed in a basket, and drawn from the river by Pharaoh’s daughter. That is a strange story. And a shepherd boy, David, becomes Israel’s greatest king. That is strange. And think about Israel, God’s people. They carry forward the plan of God for the salvation of the world, and are taken captive by the Babylonians, and then return only to be ruled by the Persians, Greeks and Romans. The God of creation has people and a plan that isn’t about power. That is strange in this world.

And then there’s this strange story in Matthew about the “shoot,” the “branch,” Jesus the Messiah. It’s a story about young woman and faithful carpenter from the backwater town of Nazareth. It’s the story about a dream and a promise and an angel. It’s the story about a baby who will carry forward God’s plans of salvation, and show that “God is with us.” And Joseph believes the strange story and dream. Perhaps that is the strangest thing of all...that Joseph really believes it. The ways of God’s salvation are strange.

III. Reflections

I have about two weeks worth of catalogues that we recently received in the mail. Here they are (hold up stack of catalogues). They weigh about 25 pounds. It looks to me like the marketing and printing segment of our economy should be doing well. It is the “pre” and “post” Black Friday advertizing. It is our commercial world’s message about getting ready for Christmas: “Buy gifts.” Buy gifts that your friends and loved ones want or need. Buy gifts because it is the expectation. Buy gifts because you appreciate your boss, or value your colleagues, or want to build relationships with in-laws, or love your family, or are generous with your employees. There’s lots of good gift giving. It can be a good thing. This stack of catalogues.....it’s not so strange this time of year. I suppose it’s expected, isn’t it?

I also have this Advent devotional. Along with many of you I’m reading it. Each day there’s a brief scripture reading, a reflection, and often a prayer. There are no pictures, except on the cover. It didn’t come in the mail....I had to pick it up. There are no sexy pictures of models, or glossy prints of the newest things, or websites and order information in big, bold type. Rather, it’s a collection of reflections on Advent by author and priest Henri Nouwen. In it Nouwen invites readers to practice some silence, and stillness, and quiet for Advent. In our instant, get it now, world, Nouwen talks about Advent patience; maybe choosing the longer line at the store (can you imagine that?), not looking at your watch (I’m trying that), and speaking kindly to the stressed out clerk. In one reflection Nouwen writes (The Lord is Near, p. 4):

“The work of salvation takes place in the midst of a world that continues to shout, scream and overwhelm us with its claims and promises. But the promise is hidden in the shoot that sprouts from the stump, a shoot that hardly anyone notices.”

I think Nouwen is onto the strange ways of God.

Nouwen goes on to pray:

“Dear Jesus, I know that you can give me eyes to see the signs of your presence in the world, and I pray for this. But I also pray for faith in you for those times when I will not be able to see, to understand or feel your presence in my life. Grant me the courage to persevere and to hope in things unseen.”

Advent patience, stillness and silence.....looking for the shoot....listening for the angel....pondering the quiet dream.....watching the light of a candle push back the darkness.....it’s a strange way for Advent. But maybe in the strange ways of God in the world, and in the strange ways of God’s salvation....there’s something to a strange, little booklet in a sea of advertizing catalogues.....something to the strange ways of Christian Advent practices.

And “strange” doesn’t just mean weird or unfamiliar. According to the dictionary it can also mean “exciting wonder or awe.” “Exciting wonder or awe”.....perhaps it would be good thing if our Advent preparations for Christmas contained a little “strange.”

(Sermon concludes with 4Him song, "Strange Way to Save the World.")

IV. Appendix

A STRANGE WAY TO SAVE THE WORLD

Words and Music by Dave Clark, Don Koch, and Mark Harris

I'm sure he must have been surprised at where this road had taken him,
'cause never in a million lives would he have dreamed of Bethlehem.
And standing at the manger, he saw with his own eyes,
the message from the angel come to life.

And Joseph said, "Why me? I'm just a simple man of trade.
Why Him, with all the rulers in the world?
Why here inside this stable filled with hay?
Why her? She's just an ordinary girl."
Now I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say,
but this is such a strange way to save the world.

To think of how it could have been, if Jesus had come as He deserved.
There would have been no Bethlehem, no lowly shepherds at His birth.
But Joseph knew the reason love had to reach so far,
And as he held the Savior in his arms, he must have thought,

"Why me? I'm just a simple man of trade.
Why Him, with all the rulers in the world?
Why here inside this stable filled with hay?
Why her? She's just an ordinary girl."
Now I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say,
but this is such a strange way to save the world.

For unto you is born this day a Savior, Christ the Lord!

Now I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say,
but this is such a strange way to save the world.

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